

American Foreign Policy: A Question of Democracy

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Ali, Omar. "American Foreign Policy: A Question of Democracy" Black Star Magazine (November 4, 2001).

Made available courtesy of Emory University: http://pages.towson.edu/oali/black_star_magazine.htm

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Speaking as an American and a New Yorker, not everyone around here agrees on the U.S. government's military response to the September 11th terrorist attacks on the World Trade Centre and the Pentagon. With few exceptions, none of these disagreements are apparent from listening to U.S. Congressional debates or watching CNN - the key makers and disseminators of U.S. foreign policy, respectively. With only handfuls of people at scattered rallies, speak-outs, and demonstrations gathering on campuses and city squares in protest of the U.S. bombings in Afghanistan, one is left to wonder how widespread anti-war sentiment actually is in America.

In the absence of a serious national dialogue on U.S. foreign policy, there is a growing movement of political independents and third-party activists who are making practical inroads into democratising the American political process - an electoral process dominated by the Democratic and Republican parties, who determine U.S. foreign policy. It is by virtue of opening up the political options of American voters (from making petitioning requirements for independent candidates to get on the ballot more equitable, to allowing independent candidates to be able to participate in televised debates) that Americans predisposed against war have the best shot at impacting the decades-long foreign policy that has left all Americans vulnerable to attacks by religious and political terrorists - and stopping acts of U.S. military terrorism against others.

Over the past decade there has been a discernable shift towards independent politics in the U.S. The latest Gallup Poll shows that upwards of 42% of eligible voters in the U.S. consider themselves independent - whether being affiliated to a specific third party or no party at all. Across the board, young people are by far the most independent-minded group. They are also the least likely to vote. But they are hardly alone, since the U.S. has one of the lowest levels of voter participation in the world: 38% voter participation in Congressional elections, barely 50% in Presidential elections, and usually under 30% in municipal elections. This lack of voter participation has everything to do with the highly partisanship nature of the Democratic and Republican parties and the litany of discriminatory election laws they have written against independents over the years.

At the heart of the independent political movement for democracy is America's leading black independent, Dr. Lenora Fulani, someone who has been recently attacked and labelled in the press as "Anti-American" for her anti-war political convictions. In 1988 she became the first woman and first African-American to get on the ballot in all fifty states running as an independent candidate for president. While she had to gather nearly 1.5 million signatures just to get on the ballot, the two major parties only needed to gather approximately 100,000, combined! Since then she has spearheaded numerous legislative and electoral campaigns, often in coalition with others, to challenge the bipartisan control of America. In the process, she has helped to inch black America towards voting outside of the Democratic Party.

White Americans have traditionally been more willing to break from the major parties than African-Americans. Twenty million, mostly white, Americans voted for Ross Perot in 1992 for president (the largest aggregate voter turnout in American history for an independent); Minnesotans elected Governor Jesse Ventura to office in 1998 as a Reform Party candidate; and Ralph Nader pulled several million votes in the 2000 Presidential election as a Green Party candidate, again, mostly from white voters.

During the 2000 Presidential election, the two leading independent presidential candidates, Nader and Patrick Buchanan, were highly critical of U.S. foreign policy -the former offering a critique from the Left, the latter from the Right. Both were also excluded from the presidential debates, even though polls showed that up to 55% of Americans surveyed wanted them to participate in the nationally televised debates (even if they weren't necessarily going to vote for them). The result of excluding the independents from the debates was that neither of the major party candidates touched foreign policy issues. No dialogue was to be heard about U.S. involvement in the Middle East, the Balkans, or anywhere else. A deafening silence replaced what should have been a vigorous debate about the nation's role abroad, now only too contemptible given the September 11th attacks which have been linked to American foreign policy.

The culprit for the exclusion of independents from the presidential debates has been a bipartisan pseudo-governmental body, the Commission on Presidential Debates (CPD), headed up by the former chairmen of both major national parties. It is bipartisan bodies such as the CPD that keep Americans out of the political process and discouraged from participating in any way, shape, or form. Among the lowest on the list of participation are African-Americans. And while neither Nader nor Buchanan made any substantive appeals towards African-American communities as independent candidates, there is nevertheless motion among African-Americans towards independence.

The Washington D.C.-based Joint Centre for Political and Economic Studies reports in their latest opinion study that independent self-identification is on the rise among African Americans, though less sharp a rise than among other groups of Americans. Fulani, who has spent the last two decades helping to move black America independent by creating independent political vehicles in order to do so, may be on the verge now of leading a mini-exodus of African-Americans out of New York's Democratic Party, which commands fierce loyalty among black Americans.

In New York, the political vehicle she has helped to create, the Independence Party, is the state's third largest and fastest growing party. Established nearly eight years ago by a broad range of New Yorkers - black and white, liberals and conservatives - the Independence Party is currently fielding a slate of candidates that share divergent views on policies, including foreign policy, but share a commitment to fostering more democracy in the electoral system. The issues these Independents share in common are political reform issues that include same day voter registration, initiative and referendum, and non-partisan municipal elections -issues that deal directly with structural political inequities.

Being in New York, one gets the sense that the independent movement has come alive in this year's citywide elections like never before. In part, as a result of racist ploys by the Democratic Party's current mayoral candidate, Public Advocate Mark Green, to undermine his Puerto Rican contender, Bronx Borough President Fernando Ferrer, in the Democratic Party primary, African-Americans (and Hispanics) in the city are more willing to follow Fulani's lead in breaking away from the Democratic Party and voting for the Independence Party's candidates instead.

The Independence Party's slate, not all of whom agree on America's military response, are: billionaire businessman Michael Bloomberg for Mayor, long-time independent and African-American physician Dr. Jessie Fields for Manhattan Borough President, and a host of City Council candidates - from Kwong Hui in Chinatown, to Giovani Puella in Washington Heights, to Michelle McCleary and Allen Cox in Harlem. They are the mix of New Yorkers that span race, ideology, and wealth that make up America.

This growing movement of independents could very well be the genesis of a new American foreign policy. But only an actual expansion of democracy, and time, will tell. Such are the vagaries of having an open political process where the majority of people decide.